

Ovid's error: Actaeon, sight, sex, and striptease

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Sex and the city was a dangerous combination when the city was Rome and Augustus its 'Mr. Big'. In 18 B.C., the emperor Augustus passed two laws encouraging all Roman citizens of child-bearing age to marry and simultaneously outlawing sex outside marriage, making adultery a criminal offence punishable by harsh penalties.

A poem and a mistake

Following this legislation, in A.D. 8, the poet Ovid was banished by the emperor Augustus far from the city of Rome to modern-day Romania. Ovid himself tells us that he was exiled on two charges: *carmen et error* ('a poem and a mistake'). The poem is the *Ars amatoria* (or *Art of Love*), which fell foul of Augustus' anti-adultery, pro-marriage laws, by claiming to teach the men and women of Rome how to conduct affairs with one another.

The *error* or mistake is one of the ancient world's great unsolved mysteries. Ovid never tells us what it was, but he does reveal that it was connected with something which he accidentally saw. In one of the few passages where Ovid reveals anything about his error, *Tristia* 2.103 ff., written in exile, he likens it to the mistake of Actaeon, a young hunter who, in Greek myth, while wandering through the woods unintentionally saw the goddess of hunting and virginity, Diana, bathing naked. Diana punished him for this by transforming him into a stag, which was then ripped to pieces by Actaeon's own hunting dogs.

Ovid's source for the myth of Actaeon is his own earlier poetry, which he encourages his readers to return to. Book 3 of Ovid's epic *Metamorphoses* had related this myth as an example of the tragic downfall of an innocent man at the hands of the gods. Although Ovid there emphasizes that Actaeon is not to blame for his fate, those who take Ovid's hint and go back to the narration of the myth in *Metamorphoses* 3 may start to question Actaeon's – or their own – innocence.

Undressing the goddess

Despite opening the myth of Actaeon with an explicit claim that the young man was blameless, Ovid sets the scene for Actaeon's viewing of the naked goddess in a way which encourages his readers to see the nudity of the goddess as sexual. Ovid elaborately describes Diana's preparations for her bath, telling us how, one midday, the goddess came to the woodland pool where she was accustomed to bathe her virginal limbs (*uirgineos artus*), and handed her hunting spear, quiver, and bow to her nymphs, before laying aside her dress and sandals, and having her hair put up. Actaeon does not see any of this, but we, Ovid's readers, do, and Ovid effectively turns us into voyeurs here, Peeping Toms looking at the extended scene of the goddess undressing. Ovid's description teases us with the possibility that we may catch a glimpse of the goddess's naked beauty, with the concentration on Diana's virginal limbs raising the strong possibility that she will be sexually violated by what follows.

Ovidian (strip)tease in *Amores* 1.5

Readers of Ovid might also reasonably expect the scene that follows the undressing of Diana to be sexual in nature from an earlier Ovidian poem in which a woman strips at midday. That poem is *Amores* 1.5, one of the first – and best – sex scenes in literature. I give you the poem below in the fine translation by the 16th-century poet, Christopher Marlowe:

*In summer's heat and mid-time of the day,
To rest my limbs upon a bed I lay;
One window shut, the other open stood,
Which gave such light as twinkles in a wood,
5 Like twilight glimpse at setting of the sun,
Or night being past, and yet not day begun.
Such light to shamefast maidens must be shown,
Where they may sport and seem to be unknown.
Then came Corinna in a long loose gown,
10 Her white neck hid with tresses hanging down,
Resembling fair Semiramis going to bed,
Or Lais of a thousand wooers sped.
I snatched her gown; being thin, the harm was small,
Yet striv'd she to be cover'd therewithal,
15 And striving thus as one that would be cast,
Betray'd herself, and yielded at the last.
Stark naked as she stood before mine eye,
Not one wen in her body could I spy.
What arms and shoulders did I touch and see,
20 How apt her breasts were to be press'd by me!
How smooth a belly under her waist saw I,
How large a leg, and what a lusty thigh!
To leave the rest, all lik'd me passing well;
I cling'd her naked body, down she fell.
25 Judge you the rest: being tir'd she bade me kiss;
Jove send me more such afternoons as this.*

Although Ovid claims that he is lying down to rest his limbs, it soon becomes clear that he has more than rest in mind. The sultry midday setting and low lighting of lines 3 ff. set the mood for what follows. These conditions are ideal for a steamy sex scene, as Ovid hints in line 7 when he describes the half-light as suitable for maidens. The impression that this is a sex scene is confirmed when Ovid's girlfriend, Corinna, suddenly enters the picture in line 9, in her first named appearance in his poetry. Her entrance is even more dramatic in Ovid than Marlowe's version: Ovid draws his readers into the scene, encouraging them to have a good look, with the words *ecce, Corinna uenit* ('Behold, Corinna comes!', line 9). Everything about Corinna's appearance oozes sex appeal, from her scanty dress and let-down hair to suggestive comparisons to the exotic, oriental queen Semiramis and the famous prostitute Lais. Ovid cannot resist the invitation: he snatches at her dress to remove it, and although Corinna fights against him, Ovid suggests that she actually wants to be stripped. What follows in lines 17 ff. is a blow-by-blow account of the charms of the naked woman standing before Ovid, as the poet details her various physical features. It would be impossible to pick Ovid's Corinna out from an identity parade on the information he gives us: she is simply each and every attractive young woman naked, and even her name, which comes from *kore*, the Greek word for 'girl', may hint at this. But this elaborate delineation of her body is ultimately a tease, as Ovid

deprives his readers of any description of the actual sex that follows. Marlowe's 'Judge you the rest' translates Ovid's *quis cetera nescit?* ('who does not know the rest?'), appealing to us as men of the world who know from our own experience what is likely to happen next when a man and naked woman come together at midday with the lights dimmed. We move from this non-description, which invites readers to fill in the gaps using their own imaginations, to the aftermath of the sexual act: Marlowe's 'being tir'd she bade me kiss' captures well the Ovidian *lassi requieuimus ambo* ('shagged out we both rested'). I labelled this poem a sex scene, but, like all the best descriptions of sex, it actually works by suggesting rather than describing sex.

Ovid's error

Despite Ovid's claims about Actaeon's innocence, it is very difficult for those who have already read *Amores* 1.5 to see a description of a young man encountering a naked female in the midday heat and the twilight of a woodland grotto as anything but the prelude to a sex scene. Ovid strengthens this impression by referring to Diana's virginal limbs, and through his detailed description of Diana undressing, which recalls how Ovid had undressed an earlier poetic female, concentrating on each physical detail as a form of foreplay, in the early *Amores* 1.5. Stripping women can surely never be innocent in Ovid after this.

Where does this leave Actaeon (and Ovid's readers)? Given that sex in Ovid works through suggestion rather than description, and invitations to readers to use their imaginations and get a good look, the elaborate set-up of the scene where Actaeon encounters a naked female in the *Metamorphoses* makes us feel like voyeurs ourselves, as we use our imaginations to interpret the stripping of Diana as the start of a sex scene. In what comes next in *Metamorphoses* 3, Ovid disappoints our expectations, switching the focus on sight to Actaeon himself: *ecce nepos Cadmi .../ peruenit in lucum* ('Behold, the grandson of Cadmus .../ comes into the grove'). We now concentrate on looking at Actaeon, and the terrible aftermath of his mistake. Just as in *Amores* 1.5, Ovid merely teases us with the possibility that he is going to describe a sex scene, and, by taking Ovid's hints, it is we, the readers, rather than Actaeon, who end up looking guilty of voyeurism. This complicates Ovid's own *error*: although Ovid protests that Actaeon is innocent, is it so easy to draw the line between guilt and innocence when Ovid talks about sight and nudity?

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